

# Steady as You Go: Achieving a Balanced Vision

*To craft a meaningful vision, leaders must strike a careful balance between ambition and actionability, grandeur and simplicity.*

*by John Baldoni*

**Y**OUR JOB AS A LEADER REQUIRES CREATING a vision that not only paints a compelling future but also inspires people to want to make the journey there. Craft a vision that is unattainable or inexplicable, or both, and you and your followers are likely to expend precious time and energy working at cross-purposes—and getting nowhere.

Effective visions push organizations, and the individuals within those organizations, to look outside themselves to see not what they are now but, rather, what they can become. At the same time, visions are also about creating expectations—both organizationally and personally. These expectations must be clear, straightforward, and rooted in the here and now.

In my work as a leadership consultant to organizations large and small, I have consistently seen that the best visions are balancing acts: They promise big things but are expressed simply. They create a sense of unity and shared purpose but also speak to people on an individual level. They are focused on the future but grounded in today. They are ambitious but actionable.

Consider this vision statement: “Our goal is to become the leading producer of servers for the health care business.” The goal is big; the articulation of the goal is as simple as can be. What follows are other suggestions for crafting a compelling vision.

## 1. Describe the vision in real terms

As grand as the vision may be, you must make it real for your employees. The best way to do this is to give people a clear sense of what the organization will look like when the vision has been achieved. One technique is to create a mock-up of a business magazine featuring a cover story on your company. The magazine’s dateline is sometime in the future. Inside the mock journal are articles about how the company has delivered on its vision, written from the perspective of some future date.

The challenge for management is to make the vision

tangible so that, in time, you can develop specific strategies and tactics to make it actionable and therefore achievable. This technique works equally well for both organization-wide visions and those created by unit heads.

## 2. Focus the vision and commit to it

As big and as broad as your vision must be, you must also keep it focused and concrete enough for everyone to grasp it and buy into it. That is precisely the tactic that Carlos Ghosn adopted when he became CEO of Nissan in 1999. As a foreigner running a Japanese company, he knew he had a short window of time in which to turn things around. Within a few months, he and his team had shaped the Nissan Revival Plan, a visionary strategy that would cut costs, reduce debt, and begin to restore the company to profitability. In his communications, he emphasized this one big idea: that Nissan could succeed if everyone would do his part to implement the Nissan

Revival Plan. And while he spoke of his grand vision of what Nissan could become, his Nissan Revival Plan provided concrete action steps for making that vision a reality.

One reason for employees’ support was Ghosn’s personal commitment. Before launching the plan, he had gone on a listening tour of Nissan operations. Seeking to gather and organize the many good ideas he heard about how to turn the company around, Ghosn called for the development of cross-functional teams from different disciplines: engineering, finance, marketing, and so on. These multidisciplinary teams would attack problems from different vantage points and make use of the varied talents and skills of their members. But what really got their attention was the level of Ghosn’s personal commitment. If the actions he proposed didn’t return Nissan to profitability, he said, he would resign.

## 3. Share the vision process

The development of even the highest-level visions should not be reserved for those who reside in the executive suite.

**When people are thinking about the vision and articulating it, they will be creating and working to make it a reality.**

Managers should seek input from all parts of the organization. You can form a vision committee comprising people from multiple disciplines. Gather people at an off-site to discuss the vision; off-site locations work best because they minimize interruptions.

In preparing for an off-site, take a cue from what product designers do. They “dress” the environment with visual cues to inspire thought. These visual cues can be photographs, works of art, swatches of fabric, or gadgets. By dressing the environment, you prepare people to step outside themselves and focus on something different. Along that line, ask a facilitator to stage activities, games, and even simulations to spark thought.

Once the vision is developed, make a big deal of it. Talk about it. Celebrate it. Most of all, sell it. Selling the vision means communicating to the far corners of the organization. Some organizations stage all-staff meetings to announce it. Other organizations print the vision statement on cards, banners, and posters.

#### 4. Communicate the vision in personal terms

Visions do not automatically include the WIIFM (“What’s in it for me?”) factor. You have to integrate it, and you must

##### THINKING BIG AT THE UNIT LEVEL

Thinking big isn’t reserved for top company leaders. Unit and departmental heads should be doing it as well. The key here is to create a sense of greater purpose for your team, one that relates team objectives to the larger whole. Indeed, your goal is to get everyone in the unit to think big, to see how what they do as individuals and as a team contributes to the success of the organization.

The payoff? When everyone has the big picture in focus, managers can more effectively encourage their people to ask “What if?” questions as a means of stimulating better or different ways of doing things. Take an IT system upgrade, for instance. It can be disruptive to an organization, but if the CIO effectively connects the project to the greater needs of the company (“This will improve customer-response time by 33%, which is integral to the rollout of the new product line”), she provides her team with a greater sense of purpose.

Then, when she invites her team to come up with ways of making it less inconvenient for users, the vision will spark some creative thinking. After all, any glitches in the implementation will stand in the way of boosting the all-important customer-response time. What’s more, the IT team will feel empowered to think more imaginatively in the future.

make it personal. Managers can do this by casting the future as a narrative. For example, a manager might say, “When we achieve our vision, our customers will love us because our products and our services will be first-class. Our competitors will want to be like us. People will be banging on our doors to work for us. Investors will want to buy into our company. You will be proud of what you do and for whom you do it.”

While the vision statement itself is not a to-do list, the stories you weave around it make it clear that employees must participate. The vision must move from what the leader wants to what the people can make happen. The vision, therefore, becomes shared. To increase participation, here are two suggestions:

- **Personalize the vision.** Some companies paint their vision statement on a wall and invite employees to sign their names. The physical act of signing initiates commitment to the vision and encourages people to further their commitment with subsequent actions. Managers then need to follow up on the commitment with departmental objectives that fulfill the vision.
- **Tell vision stories.** Make the journey real. Think of the pioneers who kept diaries as they crossed the land to the territories of Oregon and California. They told stories about what they saw, heard, and even feared. They marked their stories with milestones such as rivers forded, game slaughtered, and Indians encountered along the way. In the same way, people can tell stories about their journeys along the vision trail. Invite people to share stories of their progress. Post the stories on the company’s intranet or internal blog. Repeat them at all-staff meetings.

#### Creating genuine balance

A strong and vibrant vision gives people a sense of purpose. Because visions are serious business, crafting one demands a leader’s full analytical and imaginative engagement. The process of crafting a vision that I have outlined here may strike some as rigid, but, actually, it is merely good discipline. When people are thinking about the vision and articulating it, they will be creating and working to flesh it out and make it a reality. ♦

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